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The Oral History Project that was completed by University of North Alabama students as part of the Public History program yielded many interesting stories about the daily work lives of North Alabamians. Of particular interest were the stories of African Americans in the area who overcame the obstacles of racism and segregation to create successful and fulfilling careers. These individuals worked diligently to create more opportunities for themselves and their families by becoming skilled tradesmen, educators, and military personnel. This progress is exemplified in the personal recollections of Louise Hyler, Otis Smith, Arthur Graves, and Huston Cobb Jr. Their memories will be used to paint a picture of what it was like to live and work in North Alabama during the era of desegregation.

For years after Reconstruction, many African American families in the South provided for their families by working the land. However, the experiences of families in North Alabama were not limited to the conventional sharecropping experience. In fact, several families owned many acres of land. Huston Cobb Jr., born in 1925, stated that his maternal grandfather owned fifty-two acres of land near Leighton, Alabama. His paternal grandfather owned forty-two acres

and rented forty-six additional acres nearby. When asked if the farming on his family land followed the sharecropping method, Mr. Cobb responded by saying, "We didn't do that. It was for folks that didn't have their own. If you didn't own your own land you did that. I didn't even know how sharecropping worked until after I came out of the service."[1] Louise Hyler's father was also able to avoid sharecropping. After having served and been disabled in World War I, he returned to farming in the Barton area of Colbert County. Due to his injuries, he would rent land that his family owned and hire out workers to tend the crops. In contrast to African Americans in southern Alabama, who were predominantly restricted to sharecropping, these families illustrate that many African Americans in North Alabama were able to earn a livelihood by working and owning their own land. Since these families owned their own land, they were able to avoid the vicious cycle of debt that afflicted sharecropping families. Though these families were not rich, they were better able to provide for their families' material and educational needs.

Not only were they able to provide for their own families, but people like Louise Hyler's family also provided employment opportunities for others. During the cotton harvest, Hyler kept the records while workers came from Tuscumbia to work on the farms harvesting crops. All the farm work was done by horse and hand. It was difficult, but Hyler indicated that she enjoyed it by stating,

1 Huston Cobb Jr., interview by Jonathan Watts, November 16, 2012.

> Twelve hundred pounds was the amount he would take the cotton to the gin [in Tuscumbia] for a bale of cotton. Now during the corn time I did help a little bit with that, but with sugar cane, they had boards they make for the purpose and you go up and down the rows, strip all the leaves off first, and then the people come behind you and cut it down, then they'd pile it up in piles, and they would take it to the mill where they made the syrup. And that was a lot of fun.[2]

These families grew many types of crops such as cotton, corn, and sweet potatoes alongside other garden crops. Also, many raised animals such as cows, goats, and hogs. While many African Americans remained in agricultural jobs for their entire lives, opportunities soon arose for their children and families to work in places beyond the farm.

Many African Americans were able to obtain jobs in several different professions besides farming, despite facing oppressive discrimination in the workplace. Arthur Graves's father was a fireman on the Southern Railroad. Since there was no possibility of becoming a conductor or engineer, this was considered to be a good job for an African American. Despite this blatant inequality in job opportunities, Arthur Graves remembered his father's experience fondly by recalling that,

> We would be riding in the car and he'd be sitting on the back seat and he'd tell you how fast you were going within two or three miles. And we used to laugh about it; I said daddy, how you do that. And he just smiled, but he finally explained to us how it was done. You see, on the old railroads, the lines of communication were landlines, telephone poles. But you drive down the

2 Louise Hyler, interview by Hannah Goode-Garmon, November 5, 2012.

> road; all those poles were the same distance apart. And he would count in his mind, "One, two, three, four." As you passed this pole, he'd start counting and see where he was when you passed the second pole. And he would convert time and distance to miles per hour by how fast you were going from one pole to the next. But being a fireman on the railroad, they had to figure their time and distance on how fast they were going from one pole to the next.[3]

Men with such obvious intelligence and skill were routinely overlooked in their professions simply because of the color of their skin.

Perhaps no other organization in North Alabama created more employment opportunities for African Americans away from the farm as the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Despite discriminatory policies elsewhere, ninety percent of all African Americans who were hired by TVA worked at Wilson Dam, Joe Wheeler Dam, or Pickwick Landing Dam. The black population in the Muscle Shoals–Wheeler Dam area was approximately twenty-five percent at the time of TVA's takeover of the project. Black employment ranged from between 16.2 to 20.1 percent with an average of 18.2 percent at these sites.[4] Many activists argued that the percentages should have been higher and that black employees were still discriminated against. However, this still amounted to a large number of employed African Americans who would have otherwise been limited to agricultural or other menial labor jobs.

3 Arthur Graves, interview by Tess Evans, November 7, 2012.

4 Nancy L. Grant, *TVA and Black Americans: Planning for the Status Quo* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1990), 49.

While TVA did hire and employee many African Americans, it must be said that they also sought to conform to the social patterns of a racially segregated society. These practices are illustrated in the fact that African Americans were entirely prevented from working on many TVA projects, such as the Norris Dam in eastern Tennessee, because many white residents did not want to live and work alongside African Americans. The actions of the middle level officials and line supervisors, who were responsible for hiring, ensured that TVA employment practices remained consistently discriminatory.[5]

Huston Cobb Sr. went to work in 1934 for the Tennessee Valley Authority building Wheeler Dam. He worked at TVA for over thirty years. Initially, Cobb Sr. ran jack hammers, then as a bricklayer, before finally moving to the general work force. After seeing how hard his father worked, Huston Cobb Jr. had little desire to work for TVA. However, after exiting the military at the conclusion of World War II and marrying in 1947, he eventually applied. He explained that veterans were given preference in hiring and that this helped him to gain employment. He began by working on the railroads for eight to ten months. Later he moved to the furnish building where they made phosphorus. He would stay in this position for twenty-five years, eventually becoming a foreman. Unfortunately, the phosphorus operation was shut down and Cobb was moved to the ammonia branch and received a pay cut. Cobb explained the

5 Ibid.

difficulties that this caused, stating, "They shut down the phosphorus area and transferred all of us to the ammonia branch. And then I got cut back $8,000. You got to learn how to live all over again. In the foreman business I'm making $10,000 more than my peers, more than my operators. So I lived one year like a white man. Only time I had enough money to go on vacations and do whatever I wanted to do. But they shut that down and moved me down there where I had never been and with other folks and people above me."[6] Cobb would not allow himself to be deterred by this setback.

Huston Cobb Jr. was determined to learn all that he could about a new forty-six million dollar coal gasification plant that was being built in Houston, Texas. He and other workers were given the opportunity to go work in the new plant but Cobb stated that he was not going to go as an operator. He was determined to be a foreman again. Cobb attended classes given by TVA and Brown & Rooks engineers in order to learn how to operate the plant and its components. Due to his hard work and determination, he earned his way back to the foreman position. He was one of four foremen who worked at the site and the only African American of the four. He later became a supervisor with four foremen and fifty workers under his authority. He stayed in this position until retirement.

Although he was able to move up the ladder at TVA, Cobb remembered that it was not always an equal workplace. While speaking about segregation at TVA, Cobb stated that,

6 Cobb, interview.

"They just made two bathrooms, two water fountains, and if they had just one water fountain they had two spigots. This one over here was for us with a sign on it. One day I made a mistake and drank from the white one. The guard looks at me and I just said I was sorry. But we had a place that we ate in … you went in there and ordered and then went to a hole about like a fireplace and she had your stuff. Then we integrated, we went around there and I have never been so surprised in all of my life. There was a steam table, for the white workers, which we had never seen. I didn't know anything about a steam table or anything like that working out TVA all those years until they integrated."[7] Huston Cobb Jr. and many other African Americans would have to endure these segregated conditions until 1962 when TVA fully integrated.

The military also offered an opportunity for many African American men to expand their career options. The Reverend Otis Smith, Arthur Graves, Huston Cobb Jr., and many other African American men were called on to serve their country at a time when they were treated as second class citizens. However, according to the recollections of many of the subjects in this project, the military offered greater equality than the civilian job market. Smith—who served in the Army—stated that, "Basically, when I was in, you did your job, you got your rank. The ones who were the hardest on me were my own black superiors. I was planning on making a career of the military at that time and I had platoons under me. But from the segregated standpoint, you

7 Ibid.

just didn't feel that."[8] Both Cobb Jr. and Graves, who served in the Navy and the Air Force respectively, shared a similar account of their time in the military. Graves, who reached the rank of Second Lieutenant, admitted that it was difficult at times because, "You had two things against you, performance and color, so it wasn't easy, but you know some people made it on time. I did not experience that as such, because I was promoted right on time every time."[9] Most importantly, the military gave these young men the opportunity to earn skills and experience that they could not receive in other areas. Even though they were often drafted into these positions, they were able to rise farther in the military than they could have in the civilian world. Graves explained this phenomenon by saying, "Well in the circumstances, the military was the best thing for me at that particular time because there were no black policemen, there were no black lawyers; employment, other than in the post office, was very limited for blacks, so the military at that particular time was the best thing for me, and that's why I chose to stay with it."[10]

Military service enabled these young men—and many more African Americans in the region—to discover the large cities of the North, other parts of the country, and the world. Many encountered unimagined experiences for the first time that broadened their horizons. Some of these soldiers made the decision to never return to the farm. Instead many attended college or moved up North. Several former

8 Reverend Otis Smith, interview by Kristen Tippett Briggs, November 1, 2012.
9 Graves, interview.
10 Ibid.

soldiers in other oral history projects have stated that what changed the most for them during their military service was that they learned that a black man could aspire to more than plowing a field or harvesting crops. Unfortunately, these men often returned to communities that were still in the grips of Jim Crow. However, after having experienced so much they would never be able to accept the status quo. It would be this generation, often led by former servicemen that would stand up and fight for their Civil Rights.

The participants in this oral history project exemplify the hard work and perseverance of so many African Americans who sought to be treated equally and judged not by the color of their skin but by the quality of their hard work. North Alabama may not have witnessed the outbursts of violence that marred the Civil Rights Movement in other areas, but these stories are stark reminders that the area was not free of racism. The systematic segregation and discrimination of the Shoals area may have been quieter, but it was no less degrading, no less unequal, and no less wrong. These names may not be may not be some of the most famous names of the Civil Rights Movement, but their stories are just as important as any others and deserve to be told and appreciated.